

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the designation of North Korea Freedom Day on April 28, 2004, as an opportunity to extend hope to those who work for the advancement of human rights in North Korea and raise awareness among American lawmakers of the intolerable oppression of the North Korean people. Since 2001, North Korea has been designated a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF Vice Chair Nina Shea will speak at a rally on Capitol Hill on North Korea Freedom Day. Several Commissioners will also meet privately with defectors who have come to Washington for the occasion. "North Korea Freedom Day represents an opportunity for policy makers to listen to the voices of North Korean defectors and ensure that U.S. policy towards North Korea in every way supports their cause of bringing freedom to North Korea," said Commissioner Shea.

"Humanitarian organizations have reported that the government-manipulated famine has left over two million North Koreans dead or fleeing their country. The Gulags currently hold over 200,000 political prisoners and untold thousands of others have perished in these chambers of horrors," said Shea. "When will the leaders of the world confront the human rights disaster in North Korea? We want the long-persecuted people of North Korea to know that we have not forgotten them."

On North Korea Freedom Day, activists will also show their support of the legislation currently pending in both the Senate and the House of Representatives that, if passed, would increase funding to organizations that promote democracy and human rights in North Korea and would allow for North Korean citizens to apply for asylum in the United States. This legislation reflects several of the Commission's past recommendations and is designed to ensure that U.S. policy towards North Korea reflects American values of promoting human rights and religious freedom.

While participants at North Korea Freedom Day will raise awareness on crisis in North Korea, it is also important to discuss what the United States can do about the situation. The ongoing Six Party Talks present an opportunity for the United States and other nations to confront the threat of the North Korean government - not only to the outside world but also to the North Korean people themselves. The Commission has called for the expansion of the Six Party Talks to include issues of human rights, religious freedom, and refugees.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Dean Michael K. Young ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,